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ABSTRACT

Premarital dating couples (N=61) were asked to answer questions concerning their perceived commitment to their relationship, the amount of time they spend with their partner, the amount of time they spend arguing, their partner's attractiveness, the length of their relationship, and their desire to continue the relationship. Time spent together appears to be the most important predictor of commitment level, followed by perceived attractiveness of the partner and age of the subject. These results support both the exchange theory of marital partnership as well as Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory. (Author)

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SOME DETERMINANTS OF COMMITMENT LEVELS IN PREMARITAL RELATIONSHIPS

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of the

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The purpose of this study was to investigate certain characteristics which differentiate an individual's commitment level within a premarital relationship. Previous research in this area has focused upon one of three types of information related to a person's commitment to a heterosexual relationship. These three types of information can be classified as measures of attitude, measures of interaction processes, and demographic variables.

In the area of attitude, attraction has been one of the primary foci of previous research. In a review of recent literature, Murstein (1971) reported a trend of positive relationships between physical attractiveness and commitment in terms of marriage. Holmes and Hatch (1938) have similarly reported a correlation between beauty and probability of marriage. More recently Illsely (1955) reported that lower-status women who married higher-status men tended to be both taller and healthier than their non-mobile counterparts. Finally, Elder (1969) found that the tendency of a man's social rank to exceed his wife's premarital rank was related to her physical attractiveness. It would appear, at least for males, that physical attraction is an important factor in commitment in terms of mate selection.

Values shared by premarital couples is an area which encompasses both measures of attitude and measures of interaction process. Murstein and Beck (1971) reported that premarital couples tend to share the same values and expectations in marriage. Levinger, Senn, and Jorgensen (1970) found that

high consensus couples on the Farber Index showed significantly greater courtship progress than low consensus couples after eighteen months. Beier, Sternberg, and Young (1977) found that couples who had fewer conflicts over differences in lifestyles reported more satisfaction with the relationship, as well as better prognosis for a good marriage. These findings indicate that shared values appear to be important to the continuation of a relationship leading to marriage and that conflicts originating from value differences imply a poor prognosis for long-range commitment continuance.

In the area of interaction processes, exchange theory postulates that as a couple progresses through different stages of a relationship, commitment should increase. Bolton (1961) concluded that longer relationships imply increased involvement because of the individual's perceived increase in his or her investment. Commitment, according to Bolton, is accelerated because each member of the couple becomes an ingrained part of his/her partner's daily life. Fear of separation increases as commitment increases motivating the individual to involve more time in the relationship in hopes of securing a lasting commitment. Therefore, the amount of time couples spend together, either in terms of length of the relationship or in terms of the amount of free time both spend together, should be positively related to perceived commitment.

Finally, demographic variables have consistently appeared as moderating factors in the commitment literature. Conclusions reached about the effects of attitude and interaction processes are invariably modified by such

factors as age, education, and socio-economic status. Previous studies tended to focus on one or two types of variables related to commitment and have generally not considered the possible interaction of all three types of variables in determining commitment in premarital couples. This study is an attempt to determine the relative contribution of attitudes, interaction processes and demographic factors in the determination of couples' perceived commitment to a premarital relationship.

Specifically the hypotheses formulated by this study are: 1) Physical attraction will be positively related to perceived commitment to a premarital relationship; 2) Conflicts, measured in terms of the amount of time spent arguing, will be negatively related to perceived commitment; 3) Time spent together, either in terms of the length of the relationship or the amount of free time individuals spend together, will be positively related to perceived commitment; 4) Demographic variables will also contribute significantly to the prediction of commitment among couples.

METHODS

Subjects

The subjects were 61 dating couples at a local amusement park who agreed to participate in the study. This allowed for the maximization of the benefits of a natural dating setting. Two criteria were used for selection: 1) Couples should not be married; and 2) Couples should not be accompanied by other family members. Couples who met these criteria were asked to fill out a short questionnaire and were filmed for a short period of time. The demographic data for the subjects are presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographic Data for Couples

Variable	Mean	Std. Dev.	Minimum	Maximum
1. Age	18.7	2.53	15	26
2. Education	12.1	1.76	9	17
	Yes	No		
3. Students	55%	45%		

Procedure

Each member of the couple was separately administered a dating questionnaire developed by the experimenters. Along with the demographic variables and educational goals, subjects were asked how attractive they find their dates, how much free time they spend together, how much of this time is spent arguing, and how long they have been dating. The subjects were also asked to indicate the degree to which they were involved in the relationship (commitment level) and the degree to which they desired to be involved in the relationship (desired commitment level).

RESULTS

The results are summarized in Table 2, as follows:

Table 2

Correlation of Questionnaire Variables with Commitment Levels

	Commitment	Desired Commitment
Age	.265*	.216*
Attractiveness	.382*	.462*
Time Spent Together	.756*	.724*
Length of Relationship	-.007 n.s.	-.171 n.s.
Time Spent Arguing	-.006 n.s.	-.046 n.s.

*Significant at the .01 level.

The most surprising finding was that the length of the relationship was not correlated to the level of commitment or desired level of commitment. On the other hand, the amount of time couples spent together was the best indicator of commitment level. The rating of the partner's attractiveness was found to be positively correlated to actual and desired commitment, as was age.

Since the two measures of commitment level were positively related ($r = .75$), they were combined to create a composite commitment variable. A multiple regression analysis was performed, using this as the dependent variable. These results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3

Multiple Regression Analysis

Variable	Multiple R	R Square	R Square Change
Time Spent Together	.779	.607	.607
Attractiveness	.813	.661	.054
Age	.826	.683	.022

DISCUSSION

The finding that the amount of time couples spend together is the most important factor in determining commitment to the relationship supports Bolton's (1961) position that each member perceives time as an investment in a relationship. This finding, along with the negative results for the length of the relationship, imply that the amount of free time spent with one's partner is the important component of perceived investment, not the length of the relationship. The high intercorrelations between attractiveness,

time spent together, and commitment level indicate that there are rewards for the individual intrinsic to spending a great deal of time together. This viewpoint is consistent with a cognitive dissonance perspective. Persons who are attractive and spend a great deal of time together might be more likely to see themselves as committed, given other things are equal, since this appears to be the most salient explanation for their behavior. The cognitive dissonance perspective is further supported by the high correlation between perceived commitment level and desired commitment level. The subjects indicate congruency between their actual and desired states.

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